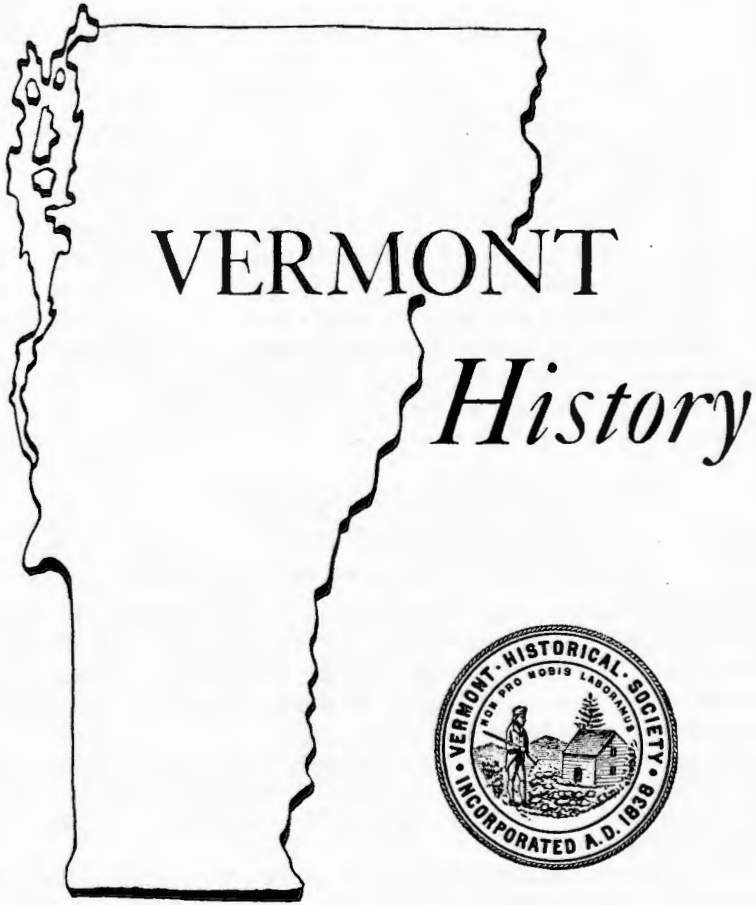
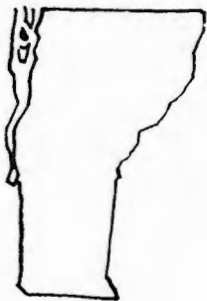


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“ . . . the history of Vermont attitudes toward slavery may turn out to be far more complex and challenging than we have yet begun to understand.”

Slavery in Burlington? An Historical Note

By MARSHALL TRUE

As all Vermonters know, their native state was the first in the Union to prohibit slavery within its borders. The Vermont Constitution of 1777 explicitly forbade slavery, and the Vermont Legislature declared in 1786 that “the idea of slavery is totally exploded from our free government.” From these origins has developed an historical tradition which portrays the Green Mountain state as an almost hallowed sanctuary for anti-slavery sentiments.¹ And—on balance—this Vermont tradition may still prove true.

Yet as J. Kevin Graffagnino has recently and convincingly argued, the attitudes of individual Vermonters were not universally anti-slavery, and the historical tradition which emphasizes those sentiments in Vermont needs reexamination.² Two documents (one reproduced below) recently discovered in the papers of Ethan Allen Hitchcock in the Library of Congress strongly support Graffagnino’s argument. The Hitchcock papers contain two copies of documents manumitting a thirty-five year old slave woman, Lavinia Parker, and her twelve year old son, Francis, in Burlington, Vermont, on October 9, 1841.³ The lawful owner of these slaves was the daughter of Ethan Allen, Lucy Caroline Hitchcock.

Obviously an act of manumission does not prove a pro-slavery attitude, but that Lucy Caroline Hitchcock owned slaves at all does demonstrate something about the attitudes of some native born Vermonters towards slavery; they were evidently comfortable adopting the custom of the country. When Mrs. Hitchcock had acquired Lavinia in 1833, she had written to her son, Ethan, that she “had the best servant in Alabama.”⁴ Moreover her son Henry, a prominent Mobile attorney and builder, owned

several slaves.⁵ It would seem reasonable that other Vermonters, while in the South, also acquired slaves. Harriet Beecher Stowe did, after all, make Simon Legree a Vermonter.

Moreover Lucy Caroline Hitchcock brought her slaves back to Burlington with her. And strong circumstantial evidence suggests that Lucy Caroline Hitchcock had returned to Burlington with Lavinia and Francis at least six years before she freed them. Ethan Allen Hitchcock visited his mother and brother in Alabama in March of 1834⁶ and on March 31st that year wrote to his brother Samuel mentioning their mother in Alabama.⁷ This is the last reference in the family correspondence which firmly places Mrs. Hitchcock in Alabama. The precise date of Mrs. Hitchcock's return to Burlington remains undetermined; it may have been as early as September 1, 1834. Henry Hitchcock was in Burlington then, and it is likely that he would have accompanied his sixty-seven year old mother on the trip from Alabama to Vermont.⁸

More definite evidence locates Lucy Caroline Hitchcock in Burlington in 1835. Ethan Allen Hitchcock recorded in his diary on November 7, 1835, that Henry had heard from their mother, presumably in Burlington, that the family house in Burlington had become available and "she wishes to purchase it."⁹ Henry was agreeable to such an arrangement and bought the house for her. Moreover on December 11, 1835, John Johnson, a Burlington surveyor and architect, completed an assessment of Mrs. Hitchcock's \$1700 property on the corner of Main and Lafayette Streets in Burlington.¹⁰ Thus by the end of 1835, Mrs. Hitchcock had returned to her family home in Burlington.

Did she bring her slaves with her? It would seem likely, although the family correspondence remains silent on the question. Mrs. Hitchcock did have a live-in companion, Helen M. Adams, the daughter of Charles Adams, a longtime family friend and neighbor. But Miss Adams, whose stepmother "abused her so much and so notoriously" that Mrs. Hitchcock had offered her a home, had lost the use of one leg and walked only with crutches. Presumably she would be incapable of running a home for a frail and elderly woman.¹¹ Finally the Federal Census for 1840 does list one free black male of 10 to 20 years; two women between 20 and 30 (Helen Adams and Lavinia Parker?) and one woman aged between 70 and 80 as residents in Lucy Hitchcock's house. It is curious that Mrs. Parker's race was not noted, but it would not have been uncommon for the census-taker not to have seen her.¹² The next year Lucy Hitchcock formally freed the Parkers.

Whereas I Lucy Caroline Hitchcock late of Mobile in the State of Alabama now of Burlington in the State of Vermont, was while in said State of Alabama and still am by the laws of said State, the lawful owner of a female slave named Lavinia Parker now aged thirty five years and whereas the husband of said Lavinia has paid me to my satisfaction for my interest and claim in her services, and for the good will I have for her on account of her integrity (sic) and faithfulness I am desirous that she should be manumitted and become a free woman. Therefore know all men by their presents that I said Lucy Caroline Hitchcock, as much for the good will I have for the said Lavinia Parker as in consideration of five dollars received, paid to me by her husband Edward Parker have and by these presents do hereby return to the said Lavinia Parker all right, title and interest that I have or may have in her services and fully discharge her from all obligation of service to me hereby declaring that from the delivery of this and, the said Lavinia Parker is a free woman, granting to her the sole right of controlling her own actions, of commanding her own services and of appropriating the avails thereof to her own use and benefit.

In testimony thereof I have hereto put my hand and seal this ninth day of October one thousand eight hundred forty one, in said Burlington in said State of Vermont.

Signed, sealed and
delivered in presence of
Charles Adams
Helen M. Adams

The evidence argues strongly that Lucy Hitchcock owned slaves in Burlington, Vermont, from at least late in 1835 to October 9, 1841. This fact cannot have gone unnoticed by the community. Certainly the signatures of Charles and Helen Adams attest that they knew the truth of Lavinia and Francis Parker's condition. Perhaps other friends and neighbors assumed that the Parkers had already been freed. The Census data identifying Francis Parker as free colored would support this conclusion. Yet the fact that Lucy Hitchcock apparently owned slaves for six years while she lived in Burlington, Vermont, remains. This curious fact suggests that the history of Vermont attitudes toward slavery may turn out to be more complex and challenging than we have yet begun to understand.

NOTES

¹The Legislature is quoted in David M. Ludlum, *Social Ferment in Vermont, 1791-1850* (New York: AMS Press, 1966, reprint edition), p. 134. For the standard version of Vermont's attitudes towards slavery, see Walter Hill Crockett's judgment in *The Green Mountain State* (New York: Century History 1921-1923), III, 290.

²J. Kevin Graffagnino, "Vermont Attitudes Toward Slavery: The Need for a Closer Look," *Vermont History*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (Winter, 1977), 31-34.

³Ethan Allen Hitchcock Papers, Box 6, Folder 14, Manuscript Collection, Library of Congress. These papers include Hitchcock's correspondence from 1815 to 1868. Additional Hitchcock papers, including his extensive journal, are included in the papers of William A. Croffut. Citations below will indicate in which collection the document is housed. The document manumitting Francis Parker is virtually identical to that freeing his mother; therefore, only the one is published here.

⁴Hitchcock Papers, Box 1, Folder 2, Lucy Caroline Hitchcock to Ethan Allen Hitchcock, St. Stephens, Ala., August 2, 1833.

⁵William H. Brantley, Jr., "Henry Hitchcock of Mobile, 1816-1839," *The Alabama Review* (January, 1952), pp. 3-39.

⁶Croffut Papers, Box 4, Folder 1, Hitchcock Journal, March 23, 1834.

⁷Hitchcock Papers, Box 6, Folder 3, Ethan Allen Hitchcock to Samuel Hitchcock, Jefferson Barracks, Mo., March 31, 1834.

⁸Croffut Papers, Box 4, Folder 2, Hitchcock Journal, October 1, 1834, mentions that Henry Hitchcock has written from Burlington as of September 1, 1834. This entry does not mention Lucy Hitchcock.

⁹*Ibid.*, Hitchcock Journal, November 7, 1835.

¹⁰John Johnson Papers, Box 5, Folder 154, Property Assessment for Lucy C. Hitchcock, December 12, 1835. Wilbur Collection, Bailey/Howe Library, University of Vermont.

¹¹Croffut Papers, Box 4, Folder 4, Hitchcock Journal, March 6, 1839.

¹²Federal Census, Burlington, Vt., 1840. It is also apparent that the Census taker either mistook or was misinformed about Lavinia Parker's age.